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SUBJECT: Avian and Pandemic Influenza Information from Belarus

Ref: A) SECSTATE 209622, B) MINSK

¶1. This is a response to ref A action request. All information is from Emboff meetings (ref B) with Belarusian Ministry of Health (MoH) officials, public briefings, and press statements.

A Plan for Avian Influenza

¶2. The GOB has a preparedness plan/strategy for preventing avian flu (AI) from becoming a pandemic and containing a pandemic once it occurs. The MoH informed Emboffs that the plan could be found on the Republic's Center of Hygiene and Epidemiology's website (<http://www.rcheph.by/>), but Post's efforts to find the report have been unsuccessful. [Note: Post will send a hardcopy of the plan to the EUR/UMB.] Deputy Minister of the MoH Mikhail Rimzha is the key figure coordinating the AI campaign.

¶3. The GOB created the plan without coordinating with the WHO representational office in Minsk, but according to Rimzha, its strategy meets all WHO regulations. The FAO, OIE, and IPAPI are not represented in Belarus, although the GOB ratified the FAO constitution in June and became a member on November 18. Rimzha claimed the GOB is also cooperating with research institutes in Germany, the U.S., London, and Russia.

¶4. According to the GOB, Belarus is not receiving international financial assistance for combating avian flu and the only donor ready to provide Belarus with extra funding is the World Bank. Officials from the MoH expressed their need for temperature measurement equipment to be used at airports and downplayed the need for microscopes and other technical assistance, although they admitted they would not refuse any donations.

Detection and Action

¶5. The GOB first banned poultry imports from all countries where AI has been discovered. The MoH then complied with recommendations for its regional monitoring and research centers to detect immediately the bird flu should it appear. It also has prepared a list of indicators for local veterinarians to alert them to a potential outbreak. All border entrances and airports are staffed with MoH specialists/doctors on a 24-hour basis to check the health of people entering the country and hospitals received guidelines for AI diagnosis. The Ministry of Agriculture (MoA) ordered tests for AI on poultry farms and on wild birds within a 10 km radius of those farms. The MoA has also intensified border control over imports, raised

awareness among border guards and customs workers, and increased sanitary control at poultry farms.

¶6. The MoH is currently working on a resolution to create an interdepartmental council to better coordinate the GOB's efforts to prevent an AI pandemic. The council would include all agencies involved in the GOB plan, such as the MoA, Ministry of Defense, the Committee on Aviation, and the Border Guards. Post does not know how often they would meet.

Vaccinations

¶7. The government has begun massive vaccinations in preparation for the yearly flu season, which is expected to begin in January. The MoH's goal is to provide Russian produced vaccines to 600,00 people within high risk groups, such as children, the elderly, medics and doctors, poultry workers, and social asylum patients. As of November 3, only 115,000 people had been vaccinated. The MoH did not mention any poultry vaccination programs or development of an H5N1 vaccine.

¶8. Due to its high cost (Eur 50), the GOB is stockpiling a locally produced medicine called Remantodin as a substitute for Tamiflu. Although the MoH claims Remantodin has the same effect as Tamiflu, specialists have told Emboffs that it would be ineffective in alleviating AI symptoms.

Awareness

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¶9. The media has informed the public about AI and its consequences, but Post has not seen or heard of a public awareness campaign, although the plan calls for such a campaign among agricultural workers and animal handlers. The press reports on AI outbreaks in other countries and the GOB's preparations for an outbreak.

Constraints

¶10. The GOB claims to have a solid plan to detect and immediately isolate an AI outbreak. Post, however, has no way to assess the validity of this statement, nor can we predict how truthful the GOB would be in reporting an AI pandemic should it occur. On November 10, for example, only the independent press reported mysterious pigeon deaths in Brest and the subsequent testing for AI at an epidemiology center. [Note: The government concluded on November 14 that the birds froze to death.] Plans of emergency, such as quarantines, culling, and disinfections are included in the GOB strategy. National legislation would not prevent this plan from taking effect because, in the end, the President makes the final decision. We anticipate that GOB bureaucratic procedures would hinder efforts to receive information about a pandemic in a timely manner. In order to meet with GOB officials, Emboffs must first send diplomatic notes to the MFA at least one week in advance.

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